

TARIQ IBN ZIYAD

The Commander Who Gave a Mountain His Name



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The ship rose on a wave, then dipped again. Salt water splashed onto the deck. Ropes pulled tight, and the wood creaked. A young soldier gripped the ship's side a little harder. The far shore was a thin line in the morning mist. "Is it much farther?" he asked.

Tariq ibn Ziyad pointed to the high rock on the horizon. "Look! Can you see the shore? We'll reach it." His voice was calm in the wind that swept through the ship. The soldier lifted his head. Before, he had seen only waves. Now he could see where they were going. Tariq moved on to check on his companions. He was responsible for everyone aboard.



Before this journey, Tariq was a successful commander in North Africa. On his campaigns, he had gained experience and taken on important duties. Musa bin Nusayr, the governor of North Africa, trusted his ability. When an expedition across the sea was planned, he chose Tariq to lead the army.

Across the water lay a great peninsula, where Spain and Portugal are today. Going there meant taking unknown roads. Tariq had more to think about than the battlefield. How would the soldiers travel? How would food reach them? Where would they gather after landing? The great journey had begun long before the ships set sail.



In spring 711, the ships reached the far shore. The rock they had seen throughout the voyage now towered above them. Soldiers unloaded their belongings, opened wet bundles and chose resting places. Tariq ibn Ziyad studied the hills and passes ahead.

According to one story, Tariq ibn Ziyad had the ships burned after landing. He told his soldiers, “My brothers who fight for the faith! The sea is behind us, and the enemy is ahead.” But historians disagree about the burning ships and this speech. No one knows for certain whether either really happened.

What is certain is that Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the sea with his army and began a great campaign. The young soldier looked up at the towering rock. The sea was behind them. Unknown roads lay ahead. Tariq ibn Ziyad prepared for the difficult journey with his soldiers.



According to one story...

“My brothers who fight for the faith! The sea is behind us, and the enemy is ahead.”

As the army moved inland, messengers began coming and going. One piece of news was very important. Rodrigo, king of the Visigoths, was gathering a large army. He was preparing to face Tariq.

Tariq called his commanders together. He heard the news and considered what his army needed. Then he sent Musa bin Nusayr a letter asking for help. He would not ignore the difficulty ahead. As an officer took the finished letter, Tariq spoke once more. "Tell them everything about our situation. They must know what lies ahead and what we need." The messenger set off. In camp, preparations continued. They could not waste the days of waiting.



One day, the guards called out. More troops were coming from the shore! Musa bin Nusayr had answered Tariq's call for help. Dusty from their long journey, the soldiers entered the camp. Their companions made room and offered them water.

Tariq met the arriving commanders. With the new troops joining his army, he carried on preparing. They needed to learn to work together and know their duties. That evening, the young soldier from the ship told a new companion sitting beside him about the great rock on the far shore. Their numbers had grown. But a hard struggle still lay ahead. Everyone felt how important it was to trust the person beside them.



When summer came, the two armies faced each other. From a distance, shields and spears gleamed in the sun. Tariq stood before his soldiers. Every face turned toward him, waiting for his signal.

“Stay together,” he said. “Know your duty, and watch over the friend beside you.” Then he rode to his place at the head of the army. He had prepared for days. Now it was time to put his decisions into action. The young soldier remembered that calm voice from the sea journey. There was no rocking deck beneath him now, but his heart was beating fast again. He kept his eyes on his commander. Soon, the sounds of moving armies filled the quiet plain.



The fighting was fierce. Dust rose, and sounds mingled. Even news took time to travel from one place to another. Tariq stayed in touch with his commanders as he led his army. As one messenger arrived, another left with a new task.

At last, Rodrigo's army was defeated. Tariq and his soldiers had won a great victory. Tired faces brightened as the news spread. Yet alongside their joy was sadness for those they had lost. The wounded received help, and scattered troops gathered again. Tariq kept leading after the battle, just as he had during its noisiest moments. New roads now lay open before him.



After his success, Tariq divided his army among different tasks. Some commanders headed for other cities. He marched toward Toledo. Along the way, they crossed hills and went through passes. The land once hidden beyond the horizon now opened before them, city by city.

Toledo was the capital of the Visigothic Kingdom. Capturing it was a great success for Tariq. When he had crossed the sea with his soldiers, the way ahead was uncertain. Now he was in one of the most important cities on the far shore. The young soldier who had anxiously searched for land from the ship now gazed at the city walls. He thought of their journey: the waves, the rock, the waiting and the long marches...



Some time later, Musa bin Nusayr crossed the sea with his army too. After advancing through other cities, he met Tariq. The two commanders had much to discuss: the roads behind them, their successes and what to do next...

They did not agree on everything. They even disagreed about how far Tariq should go. Still, they continued their conquests, leading different troops. The lands under Muslim rule grew. These regions would become known as al-Andalus. The campaign Tariq had begun by crossing the sea was becoming the start of a history much bigger and longer than his own.



In 714, an order arrived from far away. Tariq and Musa were called to the caliph in Damascus. It was time to prepare for the journey. Tariq left the lands where he had won great successes. The sea he had crossed a few years before was now part of his return journey.

We know very little about his later life. We cannot say for certain what he thought from day to day or how he spent his final years. But his deeds were not forgotten. He had crossed the sea with his army, defeated the army of a powerful kingdom and helped lead a great conquest. Tariq ibn Ziyad earned his place in history books as a brave and able commander.



Do you remember the great rock rising through the mist at the start of the journey? When the soldiers saw it from their ship, they knew the far shore was near. Long after Tariq left, waves kept washing against the foot of the rock.

Years passed, ships changed, and new lives began along the shores. The place was called Jabal Tariq, meaning “Tariq’s Mountain.” In other languages, its name became Gibraltar over time. And so a commander’s name lived on in maps too.

That morning, Tariq ibn Ziyad had seen a mountain on the far shore. Centuries later, people found Tariq ibn Ziyad in that mountain’s name.

